

**EARLY CHRISTIANITY
AND GNOSTICISM IN THE
HISTORY OF RELIGIONS**

Birger A. Pearson

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Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions*

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The study of early Christianity has a long history, going back into the New Testament itself (the Book of Acts). But it took a very long time for the study of early Christianity to move out of the theological enclaves in which it had been ensconced into the larger context of the general history of religions. While the new discipline of "History of Religions" emerged in the early 19th century,¹ it was largely confined to the study of non-Christian religions. As is now well known, it was the work of the great scholars of the so-called "History-of-Religions School" of the late 19th and early 20th century that effectively treated early Christianity as a religious phenomenon in the larger history of ancient religions. That group of scholars, as Kurt Rudolph has noted, "understood nascent and developing Christianity as a part of its environment and thereby liberated it from the ivory tower to which it had been banned by dogmatics and theological church historiography."² While some of the specific results of the work of such scholars as Wilhelm Bousset, Richard Reitzenstein, and others have not been sustained, the

* This article is an expanded version of the Sigmund Mowinckel Lecture for the year 2000, delivered at the Theological Faculty of the University of Oslo on September 25, 2000. The same lecture was delivered in Bergen on September 26. I want to express here my sincere thanks to my Norwegian colleagues for honoring me with the invitation to deliver this prestigious lecture, and especially to Professor David Hellholm, who made the necessary arrangements. A shorter version of this article is published in *Studia Theologica* 55 (2001).

¹ It appears that the first course in comparative religions was offered at Basel in 1834. On the history of the comparative study of religion see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, La Salle IL: Open Court, 1987).

² Kurt Rudolph, "Early Christianity as a Religious-Historical Phenomenon," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 9-19, here p. 9.

Religionsgeschichtliche Schule changed forever the way in which early Christianity is approached in scholarly research, even and perhaps especially in theological scholarship.

One of the greatest examples of the impact of the History-of-Religions School on theology is the work of Rudolf Bultmann, who was very influential in New Testament scholarship during my time as a student of theology and religion in the late 1950s and early 60s. I would say that Bultmann played a role in 20th century New Testament scholarship analogous to that of Sigmund Mowinckel in Old Testament scholarship. (I can even refer to Bultmann as a "grandfather" of sorts, since he was *Doktorvater* to my own *Doktorvater* at Harvard, Helmut Koester.)³ Two of Bultmann's works stand out in my mind as particularly important, in terms of their impact on the study of the New Testament and early Christianity: *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*⁴ and *Theology of the New Testament*.⁵ While both of these works are essentially theological, vitiated in my view by Bultmann's theological program of "demythologizing" and existentialist hermeneutics (Mowinckel provides an interesting contrast in that respect),⁶ they do nevertheless presuppose and represent the approach of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in their presentation of early Christianity as "a syncretistic phenomenon."⁷ Indeed, much of Bultmann's understanding of

³ Helmut Koester was the first Mowinckel lecturer (1986). See "The History-of-Religions School, Gnosis, and Gospel of John," *Studia Theologica* 40 (1986), 115-136.

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Meridian, 1956); translation of *Das Urchristentum im Rahmen der antiken Religionen* (Zürich: Artemis, 1949).

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. K. Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 1955); translation of *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1948).

⁶ Mowinckel had it right: "Myth" is the special language of religion. "Deshalb kann die Religion, auch das Christentum, nicht 'entmythologisiert' werden." S. Mowinckel, *Religion und Kultus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 135.

⁷ See esp. *Primitive Christianity*, pp. 175-179.

how Christianity began and developed has become pretty much standard up to today. In briefest outline: Jesus himself, though a Jew, was able to break out of the "Jewish legalism" with which he was surrounded. The post-Easter church in Palestine was essentially an eschatological Jewish sect that did not long survive as such. Outside of Palestine the Christian groups that formed fell quickly under the impact of Gentile culture, becoming a Hellenistic cult with full-blown rituals (sacraments) centered on a mythic "Kyrios." The sacramental life of early Gentile Christianity reflected the influence of the Hellenistic mystery religions, and the Christ myth itself developed under the impact of a Gnostic redeemer myth. Bultmann, of course, was able to interpret this history in existentialist categories, which he could also conveniently read into the Pauline epistles and the Gospel of John.

To be sure, scholarship has gone on apace; new data and new approaches have presented occasions for new interpretations of Christian origins. In what follows, I want to adopt the intentionality of the History-of-Religions School, i.e. to treat early Christianity and Gnosticism as phenomena in the general history of religions. That means, essentially, putting the available sources into their own religio-historical contexts in the larger history of ancient Graeco-Roman religions, with a view to coming to some conclusions regarding the meaning of the data, and what historical trends they reflect. A comprehensive treatment is, of course, impossible within the space of a single lecture; so I shall confine my discussion to three current issues in the study of early Christianity, and three current issues in the study of ancient Gnosticism.

My discussion of early Christianity will be confined for the most part to the earliest period, before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70. The following topics will be treated: (1) Early Galilean Christianity; (2) Early Gentile Christianity, or early Christian Judaism? and (3) The early cult of Christ. For Gnosticism I treat the following: (4) Was there such a thing as

"Gnosticism"? (5) Christian heresy or discrete "religion"? and (6) Gnostic cultic life. Some general conclusions can then be drawn regarding early Christianity and early Gnosticism, and the relationships between them. Of crucial importance in this discussion is sound method, especially when it comes to our treatment of available sources. Failure to understand the nature of our sources and their proper contexts will inevitably result in a skewed historical reconstruction.

1. Early Galilean Christianity

"You are a Galilean." So said the maid in the high priest's courtyard as she accused Simon Peter of being with Jesus the Galilean (Mark 14:70). The Book of Acts then portrays Peter together with the rest of the Twelve speaking under the impulse of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The pilgrims in Jerusalem say to one another, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" (Acts 2:7). The early chapters of Acts portray something of the life of the Jesus community in Jerusalem founded by those Galileans, but we learn nothing in particular from Acts about Jesus communities back home in Galilee, apart from the summary statement that "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up" (Acts 9:31), implying that such communities did exist in Galilee. But what were they like?

Attempts have been made in the past to delineate a particular kind of Christianity peculiar to Galilee, in terms of theology and practice, often implying a contrast to the religion of the Jerusalem community. The problem, of course, is that we lack sources that can convincingly be traced to Galilee. The Gospel of Mark has sometimes been singled out as reflecting a Galilean orientation.⁸ Even the Epistle of James has been suggested as

⁸ Ernst Lohmeyer, *Galiläa und Jerusalem*, FRLANT 52 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1936); Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to its Problems*, trans. G. Buswell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), 143. For a good discussion of the issues, with additional references, see Jesper Svartvik, *Mark and Mission: Mk 7:1-23 in its Narrative and Historical Contexts*, Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 32 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), 227-236.

reflecting a Galilean type of Christianity.⁹ More recently, particularly in North America, new theories have been put forward regarding a particular brand of Galilean Christianity lying behind the hypothetical "Q" source used by Matthew and Luke in addition to the Gospel of Mark. John Kloppenborg's work has been particularly influential in this on-going work, particularly his arguments positing a literary development of the "Q" source, with a "wisdom" first edition overlaid by "apocalyptic" material that marks "Q" as we now know it.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the "Q" source has come to be defined as a "sayings gospel," concentrating on the teachings of Jesus, and is seen as representing an alternative type of gospel, i.e., an alternative to the narrative gospel type stressing the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, of which Mark is the earliest example. Theories of stratification in the development of Q have also come to play an important role in defining not only the nature of the message of the historical Jesus, but also the nature of what is called the "Q community" for which "Q" was supposedly the foundational gospel. It is argued that that community was resident in Galilee in the early decades of the Jesus movement, and therefore represents a distinctive Galilean form of Christianity, which was also chiefly responsible for the eschatological orientation of the Jesus tradition as it has come down to us.

It should also be noted that much of the recent work on Q also deals with the *Gospel of Thomas*, thought to represent the same genre as Q (sayings collection) but with a different tendency at work in its final redaction, i.e. a "gnostic" or "gnosticizing" tendency, in contrast to the "apocalyptic" tendency of Q. Theories of stratification in the *Gospel of Thomas* also play a

⁹ L. E. Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, SBT 16 (Chicago: Alec Allenson, 1956).

¹⁰ John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

role here. The work of the "Jesus Seminar" is probably the best known example of such scholarship.¹¹

We can set aside for our purposes here the bizarre theories of those who argue that the early Jesus movement in Galilee was a "home grown variety of Cynicism,"¹² and turn to the recent work of John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*,¹³ a sequel to his earlier work on the historical Jesus.¹⁴ By the "birth" of Christianity Crossan means the continuation of the kingdom-of-God movement of Jesus and his first companions (Christianity's "conception") after Jesus' death, as those companions "wrestled not only to imitate Jesus' life but also to understand Jesus' death" during the 30s and 40s of the Common Era.¹⁵ In his book Crossan distinguishes between "rural" and "urban" Christianity, and between two distinctive traditions that he calls the "Life Tradition" and the "Death Tradition." He also refers to these two traditions as "northern" and "southern" traditions. The former is represented

¹¹ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). The *Gospel of Thomas* is, of course, the fifth gospel. For a detailed critique of this work see my article, "The Gospel according to the 'Jesus Seminar': On Some Recent Trends in Gospel Research," chapter 2 in Birger A. Pearson, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion: Essays on Early Christianity* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 23-57. See now also Svartvik, *Mark and Mission*, 65-74.

¹² Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 120. Mack proposes three levels of Q redaction. For a critique, see James M. Robinson, "The History and Religious Taxonomy of Q: The Cynic Hypothesis," in *Gnosisforschung und Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Kurt Rudolph zum 65 Geburtstag*, ed. H. Preissler and H. Seiwert (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1994 [1995]), 247-265. See also Leif E. Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus' First Followers According to Q* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1994). For a critique, see J. M. Robinson, "Galilean Upstarts: A Sot's Cynical Disciples," in *Sayings of Jesus: Canonical and Non-Canonical: Essays in Honour of Tjitze Baarda*, ed. W. L. Petersen, J. S. Vos, and H. J. de Jonge, NovTSup 89 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 223-249.

¹³ J. D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco), 1999.

¹⁴ J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). In his latest book Crossan devotes a good deal of space to answering his critics, defending and clarifying the positions that he took in *The Historical Jesus*. Interestingly enough, he says nothing of the work of the Jesus Seminar, despite the fact that he was its co-chairman, with Robert Funk as the other co-chairman. See Pearson, *Emergence*, 31-32.

¹⁵ Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, x.

by the "*Q Gospel*," the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Didache*, "which can all be plotted on geographical trajectories from Galilee into Syria." The latter is represented by that variety of Christianity "which moved from Jerusalem to Damascus and Antioch at a very, very early date . . . The future of Catholic Christianity belonged to neither of them alone but to both of them together."¹⁶ For our purposes here I want to concentrate our attention on that variety of the "Life Tradition" represented by the "Q gospel" and the presumed earliest stratum of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Crossan posits a "common tradition" represented by the earliest strata of Q and *Thomas*, consisting mainly of sayings dealing with the Kingdom of God, and then extrapolates from this common tradition a religiosity characterized by "ethical eschatology." While the *Thomas* tradition developed into an "ascetic" eschatology, the Q tradition developed into an "apocalyptic" eschatology. The "common tradition" knows of an apocalyptic eschatology associated with John the Baptist, but rejects it in favor of the "ethical" eschatology that characterized Jesus' original message. It is only at a later stage of development that the Q community re-imposes an "apocalyptic" eschatology onto the Jesus tradition, a "secondary apocalyptic eschatology" developing as a result of an increasing feeling of marginalization within the Q community. This "secondary apocalyptic eschatology," represented e.g. by the judgment sayings attributed to Jesus in Q, is characterized by Crossan as "a cosmic sanction . . . added on as one's primary and essential message is refused and rejected."¹⁷ Apocalyptic eschatology in general, which is represented in the New Testament not only by the "Q gospel" but also (with different emphases) by Mark and Paul, is ultimately incompatible with ethical eschatology, i.e., "nonviolent resistance to systemic violence" as originally advo-

¹⁶ Ibid., 415.

¹⁷ Ibid., 265.

cated by Jesus. In contrast to ethical eschatology, apocalyptic eschatology "involves a God who uses force and violence to end force and violence," and advocates "divine revenge" rather than "divine justice."¹⁸

There are, of course, problems with this reconstruction of early Galilean Christianity, and these problems have to do with Crossan's (and others') views regarding Q. It all boils down to the use, or misuse, of our sources, something that Crossan himself recognizes when he says, "I also take very seriously and am profoundly indebted to all of that recent Q scholarship. If it is wrong on Q, then so am I on the historical Jesus and earliest Christianity."¹⁹ Later on he says the same thing about his use of the *Gospel of Thomas*.²⁰ In my view, the recent Q scholarship on which Crossan relies is plainly wrong; this means that Crossan is wrong, too, on his reconstruction not only of the message of Jesus but also on his reconstruction of the history of the early "Q community."

I want to make it clear here that I am not among those scholars who advocate "dispensing with Q" altogether.²¹ Christian Hermann Weisse proposed the Q hypothesis in 1838 to account for the non-Markan material shared in common by the gospels of Matthew and Luke,²² and I count myself among those who regard the "Two-Source Hypothesis" (Mark and Q), for all its problems, as still the best available solution to the problem of inter-Synoptic relationships. So let's concede that there was a document like the

¹⁸ Ibid., 287.

¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

²⁰ Ibid., 239.

²¹ See e.g. Austin M. Farrer, "On Dispensing with Q" in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55-88. The Griesbach Hypothesis, advocating the priority of Matthew, is today the most important rival of the Two-Source Hypothesis. See David L. Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

²² C. H. Weisse, *Die evangelische Geschichte kritisch und philosophische bearbeitet* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1838).

hypothetical Q, even if the problem of its delineation poses a formidable challenge to the on-going efforts of the International Q Project to establish a critical edition of its Greek text.²³

The chief problem of current Q scholarship, affecting scholarly reconstructions both of the message of the historical Jesus and the nature and history of the "Q community," is the various theories put forward regarding the "layering" of the Q document, with their assumption of a "sapiential" layer overlaid by one or more "apocalyptic" layers in the supposed stages of its composition. These theories have now effectively been demolished by the recent work of Alan Kirk and Richard Horsley.²⁴ While Kirk and Horsley approach Q from rather different vantage points, they both come to the same conclusion regarding the various theories of stratification growing out of the work of John Kloppenborg.²⁵ Kirk looks upon Q as a literary composition consisting of four discourses, "macro-compositions" made up of smaller speeches. These speeches consist of instructional material with mainly wisdom forms, with prophetic elements as well. The redaction of Q is indebted to literary convention, and presupposes a comparatively high social level of the scribe or scribes responsible for its composition. Of the many important conclusions drawn by Kirk in his book, the one that interests us most here is this one: "Q has no recoverable redaction *history* leading up to the redaction

²³ The International Q Project, led by James M. Robinson, grew out of the Q Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature (1985-89), and now consists of over forty members who regularly meet at the Annual Meeting of SBL and at the project's centers, Claremont, California, Bamberg, Germany, and Toronto, Canada. A preliminary edition appeared in the fall issue of *JBL* (1990-95), and the final critical edition has just been published: J. M. Robinson, P. Hoffmann, J. S. Kloppenborg, eds., *Critical Edition of Q*, Hermeneia Supplements (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Some 30 volumes are projected of *Documenta Q*, consisting of commentaries on the individual pericopes of Q and the history of research on them. The first volume, by S. Carruth and A. Garsky, ed. by S. D. Anderson, on Q 11:2b-4 (the Lord's Prayer) appeared in 1996 (Leuven: Peeters).

²⁴ A. Kirk, *The Composition of the Sayings Source: Genre, Synchrony, and Wisdom Redaction in Q*, NovTSup 41 (Leiden; Brill, 1998); R.A. Horsley, with J. A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

²⁵ Cf. n. 10, above. Kirk's book was originally a dissertation at Toronto directed by John Kloppenborg. (I might add that Kirk was earlier a student of mine at Santa Barbara.)

which gave its text the form it presently displays.”²⁶

Horsley stresses more the oral features of Q, and sees Q as a transcription of a text that originated in oral performance. The text itself is made up of a series of discourses “grounded in the Israelite popular tradition, over against the ‘official’ tradition based in Jerusalem.”²⁷ Prophets in the Galilean communities in which Q originated would regularly perform, in a cultic context, the various discourses that make up the Q text, and it should be assumed that these performances would vary from time to time. Viewing the text of Q in that way leads Horsley to question the whole enterprise of the International Q project, with its attempt to delineate a fixed text. The resultant text “is a modern scholarly reconstruction” of a Greek text, often a “bowdlerized” one owing to the differences between the Matthean and Lukan versions of Q. Moreover, there is no possibility of reconstructing an original text of the Galilean Aramaic in which the discourses were originally performed, even if the Koiné Greek of the discourses reflect Aramaic patterns of discourse.²⁸

Horsley devotes a section of his book to a critical examination of the current theories of stratigraphy, and convincingly shows that modern attempts at defining a secondary “apocalyptic” level of Q are really theologically based, “a way of attempting to save Jesus from perceived imprisonment in a seemingly fanatical ancient worldview.”²⁹ His work also has implications for a generic comparison between Q and Thomas. It turns out, in fact, that Q and Thomas do not share the same genre at all. It is only Thomas that can be labeled as a “sayings collection”; Q, in contrast, is “a sequence of

²⁶ Kirk, *Composition*, 399.

²⁷ Horsley, *Whoever Hears You*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

speeches or discourses.”³⁰

Horsley situates Q in a Galilean context, and regards it as “a document from a distinctive community with its own distinctive views of Jesus,” remaining firmly within Israelite tradition with no reference to a Gentile mission.³¹ But now the question must be raised: how “Galilean” is Q, really? Two answers can be given to that question. First, Q is thoroughly Galilean in its content, for the very good reason that Q contains traditions of the teachings of Jesus, whose public activity took place mainly in the rural towns and villages of Lower Galilee. Those teachings were preserved in their original Aramaic by his Galilean followers. Second, Q, as we now know it, cannot so easily be placed in a Galilean setting for the very good reason that we know it only in Greek. While it can safely be assumed that the Jesus movement persisted in Galilee after Jesus’ death, it can also be assumed that they handed down their traditions of his teachings in Aramaic. It is possible, perhaps, that such traditions would circulate also in Greek in the urban communities of Tiberias or Sepphoris, but we have no evidence for that whatsoever. What is more likely, in fact, is that the Galilean followers of Jesus brought their Jesus traditions with them to Jerusalem, where they founded what we know from the Book of Acts as the Jerusalem “church” (Acts 5:11, *passim*). It is also highly likely that the Jesus traditions of the Aramaic-speaking “Hebrews” led by the twelve “apostles” (Acts 6:1; 8:1) were translated in Jerusalem for the benefit of the Greek-speaking “Hellenists” led by the group of seven named in Acts (6:5).

This observation leads to another question: Was Q a “gospel,” i.e., a

³⁰ Ibid., 85. On the genre of Thomas see now the ground-breaking work of Hans-Martin Schenke, “On the Compositional History of the Gospel of Thomas,” *Forum* 10/1-2, 1994 [1998]), reprinted as number 40 of the “Occasional Papers” of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity (Claremont, CA: Claremont Graduate School, 1998).

³¹ Ibid., 74-75.

foundational document of a community which took no interest in the death and resurrection of Jesus? This is often assumed nowadays, by Crossan and many others, including even Horsley, since the Q document lacks a narrative of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. A simple-minded answer to that is that there is no "news" in Q, or hardly any, and "gospel" means "news"! So how can Q be a "gospel"? Moreover, did the communities in which Q circulated have no news as to what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem? Or, for that matter, no news about the healings and other deeds performed by him in Galilee and Judea before his death? I find that hard to imagine. So this brings up the question as to the function of Q in those communities. Q contains, for the most part, teachings attributed to Jesus, and those teachings clearly have a halakic purpose in community life since they provide instructions as to how members of the community are to behave vis-a-vis God and their neighbors, in anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God and the renewal of Israel. Q, in fact, presupposes the story of Jesus, and can hardly have existed without such a story.

This is borne out by the text of Q itself and its structure.³² It begins with the preaching of John the Baptist, followed (possibly) by the baptism of Jesus, and then the temptation narrative. Oblique references to the death of Jesus can also be seen, perhaps at Q 11:49, Q 11:34-35 (killing the prophets), and probably at Q 14:27 (bearing the cross). References to the coming of the "Son of Man" (Q 12:40; cf. 12:37, 43; 17:23-37) clearly presuppose the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.³³ And the text concludes with the eschatological prophecy of his disciples' future role in his kingdom, administering

³² For this paragraph I use the text of Q published in J. S. Kloppenborg, *Q Parallels* (Sonoma CA: Polebridge Press, 1988). Q citations are conventionally given in their Lukan version, even where Q scholars think that the Matthean version is more original.

³³ This is granted by Horsley, *Whoever Hears You*, 153. Detlev Dormeyer can even refer to Q as a "sayings biography." See Dormeyer, *The New Testament Among the Writings of Antiquity*, trans. R. Kossov (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 229-234.

justice for the twelve tribes of a restored Israel (Q 22:28-30).³⁴ The text also reflects something of the cultic life of the Jesus community, with a reference to its acclamation addressed to the exalted "lord" (Q 6:46).³⁵

Thus, it turns out to be impossible, given the nature of our data, to delineate a special brand of Galilean Christianity that is distinguishable from that of Jerusalem or other areas of Palestine. Indeed, it is highly probable that the Galilean leaders of the Jerusalem church stayed in close contact with the Christian communities of Galilee, thus maintaining and expanding "networks" of fellow believers.³⁶ In those communities relatives of Jesus probably played a prominent role. After the death of James in 62 CE his (and Jesus') Galilean cousin Simeon, son of Clopas, became the leader of the Jerusalem church (Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.11). The second-century writer Hegesippus refers to grandsons of Jesus' brother Jude, who were interrogated by agents of the emperor Domitian. When it became clear that those avowed followers of Jesus were only simple hard-working farmers, they were released (Eus. *H.E.* 3.19-20). Where they lived at the time is not reported, but Galilee is quite likely. Thus, it is historically probable that the variety of Christianity practiced by Galilean Christians did not differ much from that of the mother church in Jerusalem, at least until the Second Jewish Revolt (132-135 CE). Pagan writers could even refer to Christians in general as "Galileans."³⁷ But as for the Galileans of current Q scholarship, they are nothing more than a figment of scholarly imagination.

One final point needs to be made here: My use of the term

³⁴ On that passage see Horsley, *Whoever Hears You*, 262-263.

³⁵ See below, on the early cult of Christ.

³⁶ On the importance of network theory in the application of sociological theories to the study of early Christian history, see below.

³⁷ Epictetus, in Arrian, *Epict. diss.* 4.7.6; Julian, *Against the Galileans*, passim.

"Christianity" in the preceding discussion is really an anachronism. In the decades following the death of Jesus, to the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and beyond, there was no such thing as "Christianity." What we, for convenience, label as "early Christianity" in Galilee or Jerusalem was a variety of sectarian *Judaism*. That point is acknowledged now by most scholars.³⁸ But what of early Christianity outside of Palestine?

2. Early Gentile Christianity, or Early Christian Judaism?

The Christian mission to Gentiles began in Antioch according to the testimony of Acts, which I see no reason to doubt. In chapter 11 it is reported that those who had been forced out of Jerusalem in connection with the martyrdom of Stephen, i.e., the Greek-speaking "Hellenists," traveled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, "speaking the word to none except Jews" (11.20). Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, when they came to Antioch, began to "preach the Lord Jesus" to "Greeks,"³⁹ i.e., Gentiles. It is also in Antioch that the appellation "Christian" was first applied to the "messianist" followers of Jesus, presumably by outsiders. The word *Christianos* is a Latin (or Latinizing) word wherein "Christ" (*Christos* = Messiah) is construed as a proper name, probably in confusion with the rather common Greek name "Chrestos." We are not informed as to the details of the outreach to Gentiles, but it would presumably be to people who already had some association with Antiochene Jewish communities, i.e., "God-fearers."⁴⁰

³⁸ Even Crossan. See *Birth of Christianity*, xxxiii.

³⁹ The RSV, following Nestle-Aland 25, *Ἑλλήνας*. That reading is certainly preferable to the subsequent editions of Nestle-Aland, which read *Ἑλληνιστάς*, "Hellenists," reflected now in the NRSV. My quotations of biblical passages in this essay are generally from the RSV.

⁴⁰ The author of Acts (we'll call him "Luke" for convenience's sake) places the conversion of Cornelius in the preceding chapter 10. If that episode has a historical basis it would probably have taken place subsequent to the events narrated in chapter 11. Note that the centurion Cornelius is referred to as "a devout man who feared God with all his household." On "God-Fearers" see below.

Luke's report of the conversion of Gentiles is immediately followed by his account of the arrival from Jerusalem of Barnabas, and his journey to Tarsus to fetch Saul (= Paul). What sort of mission Paul was carrying out in Tarsus of Cilicia we do not know. Perhaps Paul had already begun a mission to Gentiles there – this can be construed from his own account (Gal 1:15-21) – but his activities become clearer in connection with his association with the Antiochene church. The first missionary journey of Paul reported in Acts has him in a position subordinate to that of Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3), though it is subsequently his sermons that are narrated by Luke and not Barnabas'; Luke portrays Paul as the "chief speaker" (Acts 14:12). After his rupture with Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41; cf. Gal 2:11-13), Paul begins his independent mission as "the apostle to the Gentiles." In that connection he also emerges into the light of day as the author of the earliest recorded Christian literature, i.e., his letters to Thessalonica, Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, Colossae (Philemon), and Rome.⁴¹

The early Christian mission to Gentiles entailed considerable controversy, creating problems in matters that revolved around the interpretation of Jewish halakah, and which had important consequences for the grounds on which Jews and Gentiles in Christian communities could enjoy table fellowship. At least three solutions were advanced: (1) Conversion to Christ entails full conversion to Judaism, i.e., circumcision (of males) and observance of Torah. This was the position advocated by leaders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15: cf. Gal 2:1-6). (2) Conversion to Christ entails observance of minimal ritual requirements appropriate to "righteous Gentiles," interpreting traditional ritual prescriptions thought to be incumbent upon "sojourners" in the

⁴¹ I generally accept the chronology of Paul's career given by Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin: De Gruyter; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 103-104. I do not accept the historicity of the visit to Antioch reported in Acts 18:22. Paul was clearly the loser in the controversy reported in Galatians 2, and probably broke completely with the church in Antioch. See below.

Land (Lev 17-18). This was the compromise solution advanced in the "apostolic decree" formulated in Jerusalem (Acts 15:28-29).⁴² But this solution posed problems relating to table fellowship – observant Jews sharing meals with Gentiles – and produced the controversy in Antioch reported by Paul (Gal 2:11-17). Paul was clearly the loser in that controversy. (3) Conversion to Christ entails life in a community in which ritual divisions between Jews and Gentiles no longer apply. That was Paul's position, expressed succinctly in Romans 10:4: "Christ is the end of the Torah."

Paul's radical solution contributed, no doubt, to the success of his mission among Gentiles, and provided the very basis of "Gentile Christianity" as we know it. But now I want to raise a question: Just how "Gentile" was the Christianity espoused by members of Paul's churches? If by that question we mean just how "pagan" were the people who became Paul's converts, my answer to that is: Not very.

To be sure, that answer flies in the face of much scholarship nowadays, especially among those who question the validity of the picture given by the book of Acts: In any city to which he comes Paul goes first to the Jewish synagogues and preaches Christ as the promised Messiah, crucified in Jerusalem and resurrected by God. This message is addressed both to "Men of Israel," and those Gentiles attached informally to the synagogues, those that "fear God" (e.g., Acts 13:16, 26). The Jews, for the most part, reject this message, but the God-fearing Gentiles receive the message gladly, and become the nuclei of Paul's churches (Acts 13:48-49).

Now this traditional picture has been challenged,⁴³ and alternative theories are being advanced, according to which the early converts of Paul

⁴² See esp. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 551-561; Svartvik, *Mark and Mission*, 119-128.

⁴³ See esp. A. Thomas Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the 'God-fearers,'" *Numen* 28 (1982) 13-26.

were pagans, with little or no knowledge of Judaism or the Jewish scriptures. It is as though the stories of Paul and Barnabas among the Lycaonian bumpkins (Acts 14:8-18) and of Paul's soapbox oratory in the Athenian agora (Acts 17:16-34) are more believable! One recent variation on that scholarly trend invokes social theory and socio-historical studies of Graeco-Roman voluntary associations to argue that Paul's Thessalonian church began as a "professional voluntary association" of manual laborers. Its members shared the same trade as Paul ("tentmaker" or leather worker), and Paul recruited them as he plied his trade in Thessalonica. Paul managed "to persuade the members of the existing professional association to switch their allegiance from their patron deity or deities 'to serve a living and true God'" (1 Thess 1:9).⁴⁴

To be sure, the use of social theory in the study of New Testament is a welcome addition to the panoply of methods employed in biblical research. So the recent work on early Christianity of a real social theorist, i.e. a professional sociologist, ought to be particularly welcome. I refer, of course, to Rodney Stark's recent work, *The Rise of Christianity*.⁴⁵ One of the more controversial chapters in that book (ch. 3) is entitled "The Mission to the Jews: Why It Probably Succeeded." Stark argues that "Jewish Christianity played a central role until much later in the rise of Christianity" than is usually acknowledged, and that "Jews continued as a significant source of Christian converts until at least as late as the fourth century."⁴⁶ He explores the available historical evidence, and applies social theories that he himself

⁴⁴ Richard S. Ascough, "The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Association," *JBL* 119 (2000) 311-328.

⁴⁵ R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. chapter 3, pp. 49-71. See my review article, "On Rodney Stark's Foray into Early Christian History," *Religion* 29 (1999) 171-176.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

has developed in his survey research in support of his contention. He uses as an analogy the experience of Jews in 19th-century Europe and the rise of Reform Judaism, arguing that "Christianity offered many of the same things to Hellenized Jews that nineteenth century Jews found in the Reform movement."⁴⁷ Sociological propositions that buttress his arguments include the following: (1) "*New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive,*" or those in a marginal situation vis-à-vis the dominant culture. In the first-century context this would include those Jews who were more or less assimilated to Graeco-Roman culture, or, on the other hand, those who felt themselves marginalized in relation to that culture; (2) "*People are more willing to adopt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they are already familiar.*" In the first-century context this would imply a comparative openness to the Christian gospel since it obviously drew upon the scriptures and traditions of Israel; and (3) "*Social movements grow much faster when they spread through preexisting social networks.*"⁴⁸ As Stark puts it, people do not typically seek a new faith, "they encounter one through their ties to other people who already accept this faith," family or friends. Stark shows earlier in his book that Christianity arose and grew rapidly through preexisting networks, and the same principle applies in the case of Jewish converts to Christianity. "The network assumption is not compatible with an image of proselytizers seeking out most converts along the streets and highways, or calling them forth from the crowds in the marketplaces. In addition, network growth requires that missionaries from a new faith *already*

⁴⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 54-55, italics his.

have, or easily can form, strong attachments to such networks."⁴⁹

One could add to this the fact that, for all of its numerous variations in actual belief and practice, Second Temple Judaism constituted a grand "network" of people from all parts of the Roman empire who shared a common tradition grounded in the Israelite scriptures and a common symbolic center, i.e., the Temple in Jerusalem. In any case, Stark's arguments regarding the extent of early Jewish conversion to Christianity in the Diaspora apply equally well, or even more so, to the Gentiles who became converts. Such Gentiles had already been attracted to features of Jewish monotheism, presumably on philosophical and moral grounds, and had already imbibed something of the Israelite traditions through their exposure to the scriptures (in Greek, of course). They, too, would have developed contacts through social networks of family and friends. In addition, through conversion at least to the Pauline version of Christianity, their "marginality" in relation to the synagogues with which they had loosely been affiliated would have been overcome through their incorporation in baptism as full-fledged members into the "Body of Christ," where ritual distinctions between Jews and Gentiles had been abolished, where there was "neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal 3:28).

This last paragraph implies, of course, that the general picture derived from Acts of the Pauline mission to the Gentiles is more or less reliable after all.⁵⁰ That, of course, can only be confirmed with recourse to Paul's own writings. In those writings he does refer to himself as "Apostle to the Gentiles," and presumably addresses mainly a Gentile constituency. But Paul's letters would have been even more unintelligible to his readers (hear-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 56-57. The use of network theory in research in early Christianity is, in my view, extremely important. See e.g. L. Michael White, ed, *Social Networks in the Early Christian Environment: Issues and Methods for Social History*, Semeia 56 (1992).

⁵⁰ See esp. Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1996); Svartvik, *Mark and Mission*, 324-344.

ers) than they were to subsequent generations of theologians and scholars (up to today!) if those original addressees had come from a purely pagan environment prior to their conversion. That famous passage in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 praising the Thessalonian Christians for having "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" certainly does not require us to believe that they had been pure pagans before their conversion to Paul's gospel; they could just as well have turned to God through their prior association with a Jewish synagogue,⁵¹ perhaps shedding any residual attachment to "idols," e.g., through participation in civic cults, as a result of their conversion to the living God's Son (1 Thess 2:10).

Paul's churches, even if predominantly Gentile, undoubtedly included Jews as well, as a study of the prosopography of Paul's letters (with comparative use of Acts) would suggest. One of the few of his Corinthian converts whom Paul himself baptized was one Crispus, former *archisynagogos* of a Corinthian synagogue (1 Cor 1:14; Acts 18:8). Paul makes himself very clear that his gospel is addressed "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16). That he did, in fact, recruit his Gentile converts mainly from Jewish synagogues, as Acts tells us, can also be deduced from his own writings. When he tells us that he received five times "at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one" (2 Cor 11:24), that means that he subjected himself to synagogue discipline. Or did he visit those synagogues only for the purpose of getting a flogging?

So what was the nature of the message that Paul proclaimed, and how should we label the communities that he founded? Once again, I must stress that my use of the terms "Christian" and "Christianity" is an anachronism, for in Paul's day there was no such thing. Paul did not found a new religion. He founded communities of the "New Covenant" (2 Cor 3:6) promised by

⁵¹ For epigraphic evidence of synagogues in Thessalonica see *ibid.*, 154-57.

Israel's God to his people Israel (Jer 31:31-24), through whom the Gentiles, "all the families of the earth" (Gen 12:3), would be blessed. Those Gentiles would be part of a new Israel, not one that replaced the old Israel (as later Christian writers would have it), but one that incorporated Jew and Gentile in a messianic community. Paul's Gentile converts represented a "wild olive branch" grafted onto an already cultivated one (Rom 11:17-24), in which Jew and Gentile alike become members of an eschatological Israel wherein the ritual requirements of the Torah, i.e., those commandments which set Jews apart from all other people, have been abolished in favor of a new halakah, a new "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16). That new halakah governing the new life "in Christ," seen in some detail most clearly in 1 Corinthians, was based on the teachings of Jesus⁵² as well as Paul's own Spirit-led decisions. Its ethical and moral content, however, was clearly based on common Jewish traditions.⁵³

Thus, in terms of the history of religions, Paul's religion is not "Christianity" at all. He never uses that term; nor, indeed, does he use the adjective "Christian." Paul's religion is nothing other than a new, sectarian form of Second Temple Judaism.⁵⁴ To be sure, Paul's writings and the Pauline tradition did contribute much to the new religion of "Christianity" that eventually developed. The inventor of the term "Christianity," Ignatius of Antioch, heavily imbibed the writings of Paul, but in the process subjected the Pauline tradition to an interpretation which would have been utterly for-

⁵² Paul undoubtedly had available to him a collection of Jesus' sayings (an early version of Q?).

⁵³ On Pauline halakah see esp. Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, CRINT 4.1 (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁵⁴ That is certainly not to deny Gentile influences. As an educated Diaspora Jew Paul would certainly be versed in Graeco-Roman rhetoric, conversant with Graeco-Roman popular philosophy, and knowledgeable about pagan cults. The social setting of the Pauline communities would also reflect Gentile patterns. See esp. Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, trans. O. C. Dean (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), esp. 251-303.

eign to the historical Paul.⁵⁵

3. The Early Cult of Christ.

As Sigmund Mowinckel knew very well, the cult is

a general phenomenon appearing in all religions, even in the most "anti-cultic" Protestant sects and groups. It is indeed an essential and constitutive feature of a religion, that in which the nature and spiritual structure of a religion is most clearly manifested.⁵⁶

So it is essential, in any discussion of early Christianity, to take into account the cultic or ritual life of the early communities of Jesus believers.

The cultic and social life of the very earliest Christian community, the Jerusalem church, is described in summary fashion in Acts 2:42-47, and the means by which people were initiated into the community is indicated in Acts 2:38: repentance and baptism "in [or into] the name of Jesus the Messiah."⁵⁷ The actual initiation rite, baptism, was said to confer "forgiveness of sins" and "the gift of the Holy Spirit." There can be no doubt that early Christian baptism was an appropriation and adaptation of the eschatological ritual washing practiced by John the Baptist, and we recall that at least two of Jesus' disciples (Andrew and an unnamed other, John 1:40) had

⁵⁵ *Magnesians* 10.1-3; *Philadelphians* 6.1. In those passages Ignatius insists on the difference between "Judaism" (*Ioudaismos*) and its replacement, "Christianity" (*Christianismos*). See Pearson, *Emergence* (cit. n. 11), 11-14.

⁵⁶ S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962) 1:15. Mowinckel's general study of the phenomenology of religion is centered on the cult, to which he saw the other basic forms of religion (myth-doctrine and ethos-morality) essentially related. See his *Religion und Kultus* (cit. n. 6). Cult corresponds to what my Santa Barbara colleague Ninian Smart refers to as the "ritual dimension" of a religion. Smart distinguishes six others: experiential, mythic, doctrinal/philosophical, ethical/legal, social/institutional, and material (iconography, etc.). See N. Smart, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10-21. See my discussion in *Emergence*, 10-11, and my discussion of Gnosticism, below.

⁵⁷ On early Christian baptism see e.g. Lars Hartman, "Baptism," *ABD* 1:583-594, and literature cited.

formerly been followers of John. The early Christian rite, as initiation into an eschatological community, has some strong analogies to the initiatory ritual immersion practiced by the Qumran community, which also included the conferral of the Holy Spirit ("Spirit of Holiness").⁵⁸ As we can see from Luke's summary statement, the community's members attended the daily services in the Temple (2:46, "at the hour of prayer"; 3:1). In addition, they "broke bread" in their homes, offering praise to God (2:46-47). The believers' home meetings included devoting themselves to the "apostles' teaching," associated with the breaking of bread, a "communal form of life,"⁵⁹ and prayers (2:42).

Thus, in addition to attending Temple prayers, the early Jesus believers in Jerusalem organized special meetings in their homes, probably structured largely according to patterns of worship found in the synagogues, but with the Eucharist ("breaking of bread") as a central rite. The "teaching" of the apostles would presumably include expounding the Hebrew scriptures, with the addition of teachings of, and about, Jesus. The prayers would have included familiar prayers learned in the synagogues, with the probable addition of the prayer taught by Jesus, the "Lord's Prayer." Cultic use of that prayer, in its original Aramaic in the Jerusalem church, would seem to be indicated in Paul's use of the term *abba* (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15), the incipit of the prayer that he would have received from early Jerusalem tradition. The "breaking of bread," of course, would be preceded and followed by traditional Jewish table prayers, adapted to the new cultic situation. Valuable examples of such early Eucharistic prayers are found in the *Didache* (chapters 9

⁵⁸ 1QS iii.6-12. Of course, repeated water rites of purification were also a feature of the Qumran community, in contrast to that of the early Christian community, at least as reported in our sources. See H. Lichtenberger, "Baths and Baptism," *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 85-89, and literature cited.

⁵⁹ For this translation of *κοινωνία*, and on the passage as a whole, see Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 268-275.

and 10), which also includes other examples of "the apostles' teaching," such as the Lord's Prayer (ch. 8).

As is well known, disparate views have been advanced as to the origins of the Lord's Supper.⁶⁰ One variation on the widespread view that the early Christian Lord's Supper has a dual origin, as reflected e.g. in 1 Corinthians and the *Didache*, is found in Crossan's book, already referred to in our discussion of Galilean Christianity. Crossan distinguishes between "Eucharist," deriving from "the *Q Gospel* tradition, as seen in *Didache* 9-10," and "Lord's Supper," deriving "from Jerusalem tradition, as seen in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians." These two reflect respectively Crossan's "Life" and "Death" traditions.⁶¹ He sees both the "Eucharist" and the "Lord's Supper" as reflecting a "common meal tradition," involving a "communal share meal."⁶²

I would assess the dual origins of the Eucharist-Lord's Supper somewhat differently. Its origins lie, first, in the common meals that Jesus shared with his followers in Galilee during his ministry before his death in Jerusalem. A second, and ultimately more important, point of origins is the tradition surrounding the last of those meals, what we call "the Last Supper,"⁶³ held in Jerusalem the night before Jesus' execution, and whose historicity Crossan rejects.⁶⁴ Both in Jesus' meals with his followers and in his final one in Jerusalem, Jewish eschatology played a central role. Those meals were celebrated in anticipation of the "Messianic banquet" to come. That eschatological orientation is prominent both in the *Didache* and in 1

⁶⁰ See Hans-Josef Klauck, "Lord's Supper," *ABD* 4:362-372, and literature cited.

⁶¹ Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 420. On Crossan's "Life" and "Death" traditions see discussion above, and n. 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 420.

⁶³ See Robert F. O'Toole, "Last Supper," *ABD* 4:234-41, and literature cited.

⁶⁴ Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 436.

Corinthians 10 and 11, and goes back to Jesus himself, as Helmut Koester has recently stressed.⁶⁵ The central role played by the Eucharist in the early Jerusalem church, with its eschatological emphasis, has some strong analogies to the ritual meal of the Qumran Essenes, dominated as that was by the strong expectation of the coming of the Messiahs of Israel and Aaron.⁶⁶

The chief difference between the traditions recorded in the *Didache* and 1 Corinthians 10-11 is the absence in the former of the Words of Institution. It is, of course, widely assumed that the Words of Institution were part of the Eucharistic liturgy of the Pauline church, and their absence in *Didache* is sometimes taken as an indication that traditions of the Last Supper, related to the death of Christ, played no role in the worship life of the communities reflected in the *Didache*. But perhaps the differences between the *Didache* and 1 Corinthians have been overdrawn. For one thing, as Andrew McGowan has recently argued, the earliest evidence for the inclusion of the Words of Institution in early Christian liturgy is found in the third-century *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome.⁶⁷ Indeed, one could conclude from a closer look at the text that in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 Paul is not quoting from a liturgy at all. In reminding the Corinthians of the tradition that he had "delivered" to them, he was citing a cultic aetiology, a piece of catechetical tradition, and not a regular part of their eucharistic practice. That aetiology grounds the Lord's Supper in what Jesus did "on the night when he was handed over" (not "betrayed"!), a phrase which also reflects the use of a narrative of the passion of Jesus. Now

⁶⁵ H. Koester, "The Historical Jesus and the Cult of the *Kyrios Christos*," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 14 (1995), 13-18, here p. 15.

⁶⁶ See esp. 1Q28a = 1QSa. On the communal meals of the Qumran community see Dennis E. Smith, "Meals," in *EDSS*, 530-532.

⁶⁷ A. B. McGowan, "Is There a Liturgical Text in This Gospel? The Institution Narratives and Their Early Interpretive Communities," *JBL* 118 (1999), 73-87.

Crossan has rightly noted that *παρεδίδετο* in 1 Corinthians 11:23 ("handed over," i.e., by God; cf. Isa 53:6, 12 LXX) and the repeated reference in the prayers of the *Didache* to God's "servant" (παῖς, 9.2; 10.2-3) "point back to the so-called Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53."⁶⁸ On the other hand, eucharistic prayers of "blessing," such as are found in *Didache*, are referred to by Paul as part of the Corinthian liturgical practice: "the cup of blessing which we bless" (1 Cor 10:16).

Another point in common between the *Didache* and 1 Corinthians is the use of the prayer-acclamation *marana tha*, Aramaic for "our Lord come!" (*Did.* 10.6; 1 Cor 16:11; cf. Rev 22:20). That prayer, addressed to the "Lord" Jesus with a petition for him to "come" undoubtedly goes back to an early Jerusalem tradition. But with this we encounter what appears to be a *novum* for Jews brought up in a monotheistic tradition. Early Christian prayers were, of course, addressed to the one God of Israel, whom Jesus had taught his followers to address as "Father." More specifically they were addressed to God "through" Jesus – good examples are found in the prayers of the *Didache*. But not only that, the *marana tha* acclamation indicates that prayers could also be offered directly to Jesus. As Larry Hurtado puts it,

Within the first two decades of Christianity, Jewish Christians gathered in Jesus' name for worship, prayed to him and sang hymns to him, regarded him as exalted to a position of heavenly rule above all angelic orders, appropriated to him titles and Old Testament passages originally referring to God, sought to bring fellow Jews as well as Gentiles to embrace him as the divinely appointed redeemer, and in general redefined their devotion to the God of their fathers so as to include the veneration of Jesus.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 439.

⁶⁹ L. W. Hurtado, *One God One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 11.

How do we account for this? Scholars of the History-of-Religions school attributed the early Christian cultic veneration of Jesus to "Hellenistic" influences, and made a strong distinction between the Palestinian Jewish Christian *Urgemeinde* and the "Hellenistic" Christianity of Paul and John.⁷⁰ More recent scholarship has shown, however, that strong distinctions between what is "Jewish" and what is "Hellenistic" cannot be made, for the very good reason that *all* of Second Temple Judaism, in *all* of its numerous varieties, was "Hellenistic Judaism." Jews even in Palestine, much less in the Diaspora, could not have escaped the massive cultural influences of the Hellenization that came in the wake of Alexander's conquests. So the question before us, as to the origins of the cultic veneration of Christ and its attendant "Christ myth," is simply this: Are there specific *pagan* cultic or mythic influences, e.g., ruler cults, or cults of pagan gods or heroes, or "mystery cults," which can be advanced to account for the early cultic veneration of Jesus? None can, in fact, be found, as Arthur Darby Nock pointed out many years ago.⁷¹ Whatever "Hellenistic" influences were at work in the origins of the Christ cult – and there can be no doubt that there were many – came through the mediation of Jewish traditions developed during the Hellenistic period.⁷² So what we find as precursors to the early varieties of the Christ myth and cult that we encounter in the New Testament and other early Christian literature are biblical and other Jewish "intermediary" figures or "divine agents" that are part and parcel of what can be called early

⁷⁰ See esp. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. J. E. Stealy (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1970); translation of *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913, 5th ed. repr. 1965).

⁷¹ A. D. Nock, "Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background," in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson (London: Longmans, Green, 1928), repr. in Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Zeph Stewart (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) 1:49-133.

⁷² See e.g. Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, HNT 21, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1926). For a critique see Hurtado, *One God*, 24-27.

Jewish "binitarianism."⁷³ Hurtado explores these various figures, and in the process sheds much light on early mythic conceptions of Christ. These intermediary beings include personified divine attributes (Wisdom, Logos), exalted patriarchs (Enoch, Moses, et al.), and principal angels (Michael, et al.), but in the end Hurtado can only conclude that actual cultic veneration of Jesus by early believers was a "Christian mutation" of the Jewish divine agency tradition, grounded in early Christian religious experience.⁷⁴

More recently, William Horbury has explored the phenomenon of the early cult of Christ from the vantage point of early Jewish messianism.⁷⁵ Horbury begins with a discussion of the roots of messianism in the Old Testament, drawing on the work of Mowinckel and others.⁷⁶ He then argues (against much current scholarship) for the prevalence of Jewish messianism in the Second-Temple period and its general coherence, and finds in Jewish messianism the origins of the cult of Christ, including the early Christian prayer acclamations to Christ:

Jews before the rise of Christianity had customarily praised their kings and their expected future king in vocabulary which was biblically-derived but shared with that of Gentile courts and sanctuaries, and Christians will have developed the Jewish usage against the back-

⁷³ Hurtado (*One God*, 2 et passim) refers to the "binitarian" shape of early Christian devotion, but does not refer as such to Jewish "binitarianism." William Horbury is less reticent in speaking of a "binitarian tradition" in Judaism; see his *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1998), esp. p. 123. On Horbury's work see below. My UC Berkeley colleague, Daniel Boyarin, refers explicitly to "Jewish binitarianism," in an article forthcoming in the *Harvard Theological Review*: "The Gospel of the Logos: Jewish Binitarianism and the Invention of Christianity." (My thanks to him for an advance copy.)

⁷⁴ Hurtado, *One God*, 93-128.

⁷⁵ Horbury, *Jewish Messianism* (cit. n. 73).

⁷⁶ Ibid., 13-25. See esp. S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien 2: Das Thronbesteigungsfest Jahwäs und der Ursprung der Eschatologie* (Oslo: J. Dybwad, 1921-24); idem, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans G. W. Anderson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956).

ground of the Herodian and Roman ruler cult with which they were contemporary.⁷⁷

Horbury cites considerable evidence in support of his thesis, including recorded acclamations of Jewish rulers, and Jewish texts praising the King Messiah.⁷⁸ The Jewish cult of angels and "angel Christology" also play a prominent role in his discussion.⁷⁹

Horbury's work is particularly important for understanding the earliest stages of the development of the Christ myth, i.e., before the appropriation by early Christians of traditions relating to the descent and ascent of Sophia or the Logos, such as we find in the Deutero-Pauline literature (Col 1:15-20), Hebrews (Heb 1:1-4), and the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18). The earliest Christians looked upon Jesus as their Messiah, who as the exalted "Son of Man" (Dan 7:13-14) would soon come to rule over a restored Israel. Paul inherited the concept of the Parousia of Christ from that earlier tradition ("Our Lord, come!"), but for him the messianic "reign" of Christ, and the powers of the "Age to Come" (1 Cor 10:11) mediated by the Spirit, had already begun with the resurrection of Christ. It remained only for Christ at his Parousia to bring about the general resurrection of the dead and then to hand over his kingdom to God (1 Cor 15:24-28). Paul did not stress the "pre-existence" of Jesus; rather, he looked upon Jesus as having attained to the status of Messiah-Son of God with his resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:4). The "Christ hymn" in Philippians (2:6-11)⁸⁰ gives expression to a

⁷⁷ Horbury, *Jewish Messianism*, 112.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 127-152.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 119-127.

⁸⁰ See e.g. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 281-88. Still very important is Charles H. Talbert's discussion of the structure and meaning of the hymn in "The Problem of Pre-Existence in Philippians 2:6-11," *JBL* 86 (1967), 141-153.

"Christ myth" according to which Jesus, having overcome the original temptation of Adam (to become "like God," Gen 3:5) and having subjected himself as God's servant to an expiatory death (Isa 52-53), has been exalted to a status that he never had before, worthy to receive worship as the *kyrios* who bears the very Name of God (cf. Exod 23:21). Jesus has thus attained the same status as that of the patriarch Enoch (Gen 5:21-24) in early Jewish tradition: Enoch, who "walked with God," is the Messiah-Son of Man exalted to heaven and transformed into a heavenly being, worthy to receive the worship of all the inhabitants of the earth.⁸¹ Seated beside the Most High God as "Metatron," he bears the very Name of God ("the Lesser Yahweh").⁸² The parallels between the Enoch tradition and the Pauline Christ myth are quite striking, but it is also important to note what use is made of the Christ myth by Paul. Whether or not the "Christ hymn" was actually sung in early Christian liturgy, its use in Philippians has a paraenetic purpose (vv. 3-5).

It may be noticed that, in this discussion of the "Christ Hymn" in Philippians, I made no reference to the "pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth" of the History of Religions School popularized by Rudolf Bultmann and his followers. There is a good reason for that: such a myth never existed!⁸³ Even so, Gnosticism certainly played a role in the development of

⁸¹ 1 Enoch 46-48, 71; 2 Enoch 22-24; 1 Enoch 48:5; 62:9. Here I take issue with Mowinkel's contention that Enoch was not the "Son of Man" depicted in the Similitudes of 1 Enoch (chs. 37-71). See *He That Cometh*, 437-444.

⁸² 3 Enoch 1-12, *passim*. Exodus 23:21 is quoted in 3 Enoch 12.5. On the figure of Enoch in early Jewish tradition see esp. Philip S. Alexander, "From Son of Adam to Second God: Transformations of the Biblical Enoch," in *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible*, ed. Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergren (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 87-122.

⁸³ That myth was exploded by Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Vorstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythos*, FRLANT 78 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). See also Hans-Martin Schenke, *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als Leib Christi* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962). For a discussion of the Gnostic redeemer myth in the history of the interpretation of the Christ Hymn see Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, SNTSMS 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), esp. 76-78, 120-128.

early Christianity. But what role, exactly?

We thus turn to a discussion of early Gnosticism. This will be an abbreviated discussion, out of consideration of space, and will be based essentially on work that I have published elsewhere.

4. Was There Such a Thing as "Gnosticism"?

That curious question is posed as a result of the recent book by Michael Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism."*⁸⁴ Williams, taking note of the promiscuous manner in which the term "Gnosticism" is used nowadays, explores the use made of it by scholars, with reference to four rather different systems often included in the category "Gnosticism": the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG, 2), Ptolemy and Valentinian Christianity, the system ascribed by Hippolytus to Justin the Gnostic, and the Marcionite version of Christianity. He also takes note of the bewildering variety one finds in the sources in terms of so-called "Gnostic" hermeneutics, ethics, socio-cultural relationships, attitudes toward the human body, etc. On the basis of the lack of coherence that he sees in the sources, he advocates the abandonment of the use of the term "Gnosticism" altogether, suggesting instead, that those systems heretofore included under that category can better be described with the use of another term, "biblical demiurgical traditions," to apply to those sources in which a distinction is made "between the creator(s) and controllers of the material world and the most transcendent divine being," with the use of Jewish or Christian scriptures. Such a category would be a "simple typology for organizing several religious innovations and new religious movements."⁸⁵ While Williams makes some useful points in his discussion of the

⁸⁴ M. A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 51; 265-266.

ancient evidence, I continue to think that the term "Gnosticism" still has utility in the discourse employed by historians of religions. I have also argued that what can legitimately be called "Gnosticism" can also be called "the Gnostic religion."⁸⁶

Bentley Layton traces the origin of the term "Gnosticism" back to the 17th century, first used to refer to heretics discussed by Irenaeus, members of the "so-called-Gnostic sect" (*Haer.* 1.11.1), "who call themselves *Gnostikoi*" (*Haer.* 1.25.6).⁸⁷ Those people had taken the adjective *γνωστικός*, used originally by Plato with reference to a certain kind of science (*ἐπιστήμη*, *Pol.* 258e), and applied it to themselves on the basis of a special claim to *gnosis*, "knowledge." The name of their sect, "the *gnostike haeresis*," means "the Knowledge-supplying school of thought."⁸⁸

Irenaeus conveniently supplies us with an excerpt from an actual book used by "the Gnostics" (*Haer.* 1.29), which turns out to be closely related to part of what we now know as the *Apocryphon of John*. That work contains part of an elaborate myth which provides us with the content of the saving *gnosis* claimed by the Gnostics. Thus, consequent with the original history of its usage, the term "Gnosticism" can legitimately be applied, at the very least, to a specific group of people and its writings known to us on the basis of the second-century testimony of Irenaeus. That testimony is now

⁸⁶ B. A. Pearson, "Is Gnosticism a Religion?" in *The Notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Rome, 3rd-8th September, 1990* (Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1994), 105-114; idem, "Gnosticism as a Religion," a paper read (in absentia) in a session called "Was There a Gnostic Religion" of the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting in Helsinki/Lahti, 1999, soon to be published in a volume edited by Antti Marjanen (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

⁸⁷ B. Layton, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne Meeks*, ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 334-350.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 337-340.

supplemented by Coptic texts, now conventionally referred to as the "Nag Hammadi Library,"⁸⁹ of which the *Apocryphon of John* is clearly the most important.⁹⁰

5. Christian Heresy or Discrete "Religion"?

A simple answer to that question is: Both. The earliest evidence for Gnosticism as a Christian heresy is found in the New Testament, in 1 Timothy 6:20-21: "Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως), for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith." This warning from the early second century supplied Irenaeus, later in the same century, with the title of his work against heresies: "Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called." Indeed, "knowledge falsely so called" is the umbrella term that Irenaeus uses for a wide range of heresies for which modern scholars have supplied the category "Gnosticism." Those heresies include not only the *Gnostike haeresis* of the *Gnostikoi*, but also other groups as well, particularly the Valentinians known to him in Gaul. Irenaeus traces the origin of "knowledge falsely so called" back to the Samaritan Simon Magus, familiar to us from the Book of Acts (8:9-24).⁹¹

To be sure, Irenaeus regards this Gnosis as a Christian heresy, and church historians have traditionally taken the same approach. Even now, in the face of all of the new evidence that has come to light during the 20th century, most notably the Nag Hammadi texts, some scholars persist in finding a

⁸⁹ James M. Robinson and Richard Smith, eds., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).

⁹⁰ Michael Waldstein and Frederick Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1: III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2, NHMS 33* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

⁹¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.23.2; 1.27.4.

heretical Christian origin for Gnosticism.⁹² Historians of religions take a different tack, however, arguing that Gnosis or Gnosticism arose independently of Christianity, and can be regarded as a religion in its own right,⁹³ a position which was characteristic of the History of Religions School. That is the position that I have adopted and have tried to demonstrate with a comparative phenomenological approach to our sources, using the seven "dimensions" of religion put forward by Ninian Smart.⁹⁴ The most important of these sources, for reasons already stated, is the *Apocryphon of John*.

To be sure, the *Apocryphon of John*, as we know it in its Coptic versions, is a Christian text, inasmuch as the gnosis revealed in it is attributed to Jesus Christ as part of a revelation given to John, Son of Zebedee. A literary-critical analysis of the text and its content, however, shows that the role of Christ as Gnostic revealer belongs to a secondary literary framework and to dialogue features secondarily introduced into an originally non-Christian revelation.⁹⁵ A phenomenological analysis of that source provides us with information that allows us to delimit a religion that has nothing originally to do with Christianity, a religion in which salvation comes not by faith but by a special revealed gnosis. That gnosis provides the means for the release of the soul, a divine spark in the human being that is consubstantial with the Transcendent, and its escape from cosmic and corporeal bondage.

⁹² See e.g. Simone Petrément, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990); A. H. B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

⁹³ See esp. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. ed. R. M. Wilson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), translation of *Die Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980).

⁹⁴ Cf. nn. 86 and 56, above.

⁹⁵ B. A. Pearson, "The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature," ch. 7 in Pearson, *Emergence* (cit n. 11), 122-146, esp. 126-134; idem, "Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature," ch. 2 in Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 29-38; idem, "Apocryphon Johannis Revisited," in *Apocryphon Severini, presented to Søren Giversen*, ed. P. Bilde, H. K. Nielsen, J.P. Sørensen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 155-165.

Comparative study of texts related to the *Apocryphon of John*, i.e. those labeled by scholars as "Sethian Gnostic" or "Classic Gnostic,"⁹⁶ and still other texts phenomenologically similar, allows us to broaden the contours of the ancient Gnostic religion, or "Gnosticism." And while some of the available material reflects a "Christianizing" process, wherein Jesus Christ appears as the revealer of gnosis, still others reflect no such process, including some of the Nag Hammadi texts and, particularly, the Mandaean sources. On the other hand, some of the groups or movements included in what we call Gnosticism are more clearly Christian, such as the Basilideans and the Valentinians. Irenaeus reports that Valentinus adapted the system of the Gnostics in developing his own system (*Haer.* 1.11.1), a religion which is more "Gnostic Christian" than "Christianizing Gnostic."

The Mandaean form of Gnosticism — "Mandaean" (from *manda*=gnosis) means "Gnostic"— is particularly interesting in that it represents an ancient form of Gnosticism which still exists in the marshlands of Iraq.⁹⁷ The basic Gnostic mythology of the Mandaean texts is closely related to that of the *Apocryphon of John*,⁹⁸ but throughout their history the

⁹⁶ H.-M. Schenke, "The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut March 28-32, 1978*, ed., B. Layton, SHR 41 (Leiden; Brill, 1980-81) 2:588-616; B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1987). Layton's "classic Gnostic" texts include the following: *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1); *The Apocalypse of Adam* (V,5), *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (II,4), *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* (VI,2); *Trimorphic Protennoia* (XIII,1); *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (III,2; IV,2) *Zostrianos* (VIII,1); *Allogenes* (XI,3); *The Three Steles of Seth* (VII,5); plus testimonies: *Satorninos* (Iren. *Haer.* 1.24.1-2); the Gnostics (Iren. *Haer.* 1.29); "Other" Gnostic teachings (Epiphanius. *Pan.* 40); the Gnostics (Epiph. *Pan.* 25-26). Schenke's list of "Sethian" texts includes all of Layton's texts from the Nag Hammadi corpus except *Thund.* (VI,2), and adds *Melchizedek* (IX,1), *The Thought of Norea* (IX,2), and *Marsanes* (X,1), plus the *Untitled Treatise* of the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae. These last four have subsequently been added by Layton to his data base; see "Prolegomena," 342f.

⁹⁷ On the Mandaeans see Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 343-366. For his translation of select Mandaean texts see Werner Foerster, ed., *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, trans. R. M. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972, 1974) 2:123-319.

⁹⁸ K. Rudolph, *Theogonie, Kosmogonie und Anthropogonie in den mandäischen Schriften: Eine literarische und traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, FRLANT 88 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965); idem, "Ein Grundtyp gnostischer Urmensch-Adam-Spekulation," in Rudolph, *Gnosis und spätantike Religionsgeschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, NHMS 42 (Leiden; Brill, 1996) 123-143; idem, "Coptica-Mandaica. Zu einigen Übereinstimmungen zwischen koptisch-gnostischen und mandäischen Texten," in *Aufsätze*, 433-457.

Mandaeans have been hostile to Christianity.⁹⁹ So the Mandaean material provides the historian of religions with powerful evidence for concluding that Gnosticism arose independently of Christianity. Finally, the sources available to us allow us to conclude that Irenaeus' arch-heretic, Simon Magus, was not a would-be Christian convert at all, as the Acts account would have it,¹⁰⁰ but a Gnostic prophet who claimed for himself the salvatory role assigned by Christians to Jesus Christ. The same can be said for his alleged successor and compatriot, Menander.¹⁰¹ Thus, the evidence for a non-Christian Gnosticism can be pushed back at least to a time contemporaneous with the origins of Christianity.

6. Gnostic Cultic Life.

While it is not easy to reconstruct the cultic life of the ancient Gnostics, it is nevertheless possible to extrapolate from the sources at our disposal some basic information about two of the rituals they practiced, baptism and a rite of "cultic ascension." Those rituals, as practiced by the "Sethian" Gnostics, have been treated by Hans Martin Schenke,¹⁰² the baptismal rites in a monograph by Jean-Marie Sevrin.¹⁰³ Baptism is, of course, a central rite in Mandaeism;¹⁰⁴ and the rite of cultic ascent has its Mandaean counterpart in

⁹⁹ K. Rudolph, "Das Christentum in der Sicht der mandäischen Religion," in *Aufsätze*, 458-477.

¹⁰⁰ Gerd Lüdemann is able to see reflected in the Acts account the Simonian system presented in later patristic sources; see "Die Apostelgeschichte und die Anfänge der simonianischen Gnosis," in *Studien zur Gnosis*, ed. G. Lüdemann, ARGU 9 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1999), 7-20.

¹⁰¹ For translations of the patristic sources on Simon and Menander see Foerster, *Gnosis* 1:27-33. Saturnilus (Iren. *Haer.* 1.24.1-2) appears to be the earliest known Christian Gnostic teacher. His system, summarized by Irenaeus, resembles that of the *Apocryphon of John*. See Foerster, *Gnosis* 1:40-41.

¹⁰² H.-M. Schenke, "Gnostic Sethianism," 602-607.

¹⁰³ J.-M. Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismal séthien: Études sur la sacramentaire gnostique* (Québec: Université Laval, 1986).

¹⁰⁴ On Mandaean baptism see esp. Eric Segelberg, *Maṣbutā* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1958).

the *masiqta* ("ascent"), the "Office for the Dead."¹⁰⁵

The Sethian Gnostic ritual of cultic ascent calls for some brief comment here, for we now have available to us an actual liturgical text used in that ritual, the *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII,5).¹⁰⁶ Several Sethian Gnostic texts report on the heavenly ascent of Seth¹⁰⁷ or one of his avatars (Allogenes, Zostrianos, Marsanes, in the texts bearing their names), but in *Steles Seth* we have to do with the liturgical action of a cultic community. The text consists of three sets of hymnic invocations, each addressed, in ascending order, to a member of the Sethian Gnostic divine Triad, Adamas, Barbelo, and the Unbegotten Father, and concludes with liturgical rubrics. The hymnic invocations "function in a liturgical celebration through which the members of the community participate in the ascent of their primal ancestor Seth."¹⁰⁸ The ritual was presumably repeatable, the elect of the community thereby reaffirming their salvation in cultic action. The Gnostic ritual of ascent is, in certain respects, comparable to the theurgic ritual of *anagogê* reflected in the second-century *Chaldean Oracles*.¹⁰⁹

We conclude this discussion with the observation that the Gnostic ascent ritual has no counterpart in early Christianity. Conversely, the early Christian Eucharist-Lord's Supper has no counterpart in the Gnostic religion, except in those forms of Gnosticism, such as Valentinianism, which took

¹⁰⁵ K. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 362, Foerster, *Gnosis* 2:282-288.

¹⁰⁶ James E. Goehring, Introduction, text, translation, and notes to VII,5: *The Three Steles of Seth*, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. B. A. Pearson, NHMS 30 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 371-421.

¹⁰⁷ On the Gnostic Seth see B. A. Pearson, "The Figure of Seth in Gnostic Literature," ch. 4 in *Gnosticism* (cit. n. 95), 52-83.

¹⁰⁸ Goehring, *Three Steles*, 380.

¹⁰⁹ B. A. Pearson, "Theurgic Tendencies in Gnosticism and Iamblichus's Conception of Theurgy," in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. R. T. Wallis and Jay Bregman, *Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern* 6 (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 253-275, esp. 260-263. On the Chaldean *anagogê* see Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, SGRS 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 30-45.

over (with adaptations) the sacraments of the Church.¹¹⁰

Thus, a "cult-functional" approach to our textual evidence, such as was used by Sigmund Mowinckel in his classic study of the biblical Psalms,¹¹¹ helps us in delineating the contours of the Gnostic religion, and distinguishing that religion from early Christianity.

Concluding Observations

In treating the earliest stages of Christianity in the period before 70, we have found that the assumptions of much of the current scholarship on the Q source are without foundation. Our available evidence does not allow us to make distinctions, in terms of belief and practice, between Galilean and Jerusalem forms of the early Jesus movement. We have also noted that the Gentile Christianity of Paul's missionary efforts was more Jewish than is usually thought. As for Paul's "Christ myth," that, too, is based on Jewish, not pagan, traditions. It is, in fact, an anachronism to use the term "Christianity" at all in these cases, for a distinctive Christian religion, separate from Judaism, emerged only in the second century, at the same time as a distinctive Jewish religion, "normative" or "rabbinic" Judaism was emerging out of the remnants of Second Temple Judaism.¹¹² In that process "Jewish binitarianism" gave way to trinitarianism in the former, and a stricter monotheism in the latter.

In our treatment of Gnosticism, we noted that there are good reasons, on phenomenological grounds, for treating Gnosticism as a religion in its own right, with origins independent of Christianity. While one will probably

¹¹⁰ See e.g. the eucharistic prayers found in NHC XI,2: *A Valentinian Exposition, On the Eucharist A, On the Eucharist B* (XI,43,20-44,37).

¹¹¹ S. Mowinckel, *Psalms* (cit. n. 56), 1:29-35.

¹¹² B. A. Pearson, "The Emergence of the Christian Religion," chapter 1 in Pearson, *Emergence*, 7-22.

look in vain for allusions in Paul's Corinthian correspondence to a "Gnosis in Corinth,"¹¹³ it is safe to assume, on the basis of our available evidence, that early forms of the Gnostic religion existed as early as the first century, at least in Palestine and Syria, and perhaps in Egypt as well.

From early on there was a kind of "symbiosis" between Christian and Gnostic groups, with the result that much (but not all!) of our evidence consists of texts, such as the *Apocryphon of John*, which reflect a process of "Christianization." The early interpenetration of Gnosticism and Christianity can be accounted for historically with the observation that both forms of religion shared a common Jewish matrix.¹¹⁴ Even so, non-Christian (even anti-Christian) forms of Gnosticism persisted for a long time, in the Mandaeen case up until today. And in California one can find Gnostic churches, such as the Ecclesia Gnostica in Los Angeles, which represent a revival of early Christian Gnosticism.¹¹⁵

But that's another story.

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¹¹³ Walter Schmithals, *Die Gnosis in Korinth: Eine Untersuchung zu den Korintherbriefen*, FRLANT 66, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965). Cf. B. A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians: A Study in the Theology of the Opponents of Paul and its Relation to Gnosticism*, SBLDS 12 (Missoula MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973).

¹¹⁴ I have argued elsewhere for a Jewish origin of Gnosticism. See e.g. Pearson, *Gnosticism*, and chapters 6 and 7 in Pearson, *Emergence*.

¹¹⁵ Richard Smith, "The Revival of Ancient Gnosis," in *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Peru IL: Open Court, 1995), 204-223.

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